THE
STORY
OF
KAO
YU
PETER S. BEAGLE

The Story of Kao Yu

PETER S. BEAGLE

illustration by

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There was a judge once in south China, a long time ago—during the reign of the Emperor Yao, it was—named Kao Yu. He was stern in his rulings, but fair and patient, and all but legendary for his honesty; it would have been a foolish criminal—or, yes, even a misguided Emperor—who attempted to bribe or coerce Kao Yu. Of early middle years, he was stocky and wideshouldered, if a little plump, and the features of his face were strong and striking, even if his hairline was retreating just a trifle. He was respected by all, and feared by those who should have feared him—what more can one ask from a judge even now? But this is a story about a case in which he came to feel—rightly or no—that *he* was the one on trial.

Kao Yu's own wisdom and long experience generally governed his considerations in court, and his eventual rulings. But he was uniquely different from all other judges in all of China, in that when a problem came down to a matter of good versus evil—in a murder case, most often, or arson, or rape (which Kao Yu particularly despised), he would often submit that problem to the judgment of a unicorn.

Now the *chi-lin,* the Chinese unicorn, is not only an altogether different species from the white European variety or the menacing Persian karkadann; it is also a different *matter* in its essence from either one. Apart from its singular physical appearance—indeed, there are scholars who claim that the *chi-lin* is no unicorn at all, but some sort of mystical dragon-horse, given its multicolored coat and the curious configuration of its head and body—this marvelous being is considered one of the Four Superior Animals of Good Omen, the others being the phoenix, the turtle, and the dragon itself. It is the rarest of the unicorns, appearing as a rule only during the reign of a benign Emperor enjoying the Mandate of Heaven. As a result, China has often gone generation after weary generation without so much as a glimpse of a *chi-lin.* This has contributed greatly to making the Chinese the patient, enduring people they are. It has also toppled thrones.

But in the days of Judge Kao Yu, at least one *chi-lin* was so far from being invisible as to appear in his court from time to time, to aid him in arriving at certain decisions. Why he should have been chosen—and that

at the very beginning of his career—he could never understand, for he was a deeply humble person, and would have regarded himself as blessed far beyond his deserving merely to have seen a *chi-lin* at a great distance. Yet so it was; and, further, the enchanted creature always seemed to know when he was facing a distinctly troublesome problem. It is well known that the *chi-lin,* while wondrously gentle, will suffer no least dishonesty in its presence, and will instantly gore to death anyone whom it knows to be guilty. Judge Kao Yu, it must be said, always found himself a little nervous when the sudden smell of a golden summer meadow announced unmistakably the approach of the unicorn. As righteous a man as he was, even he had a certain difficulty in looking directly into the clear dark eyes of the *chi-lin.*

More than once—and the memories often returned to him on sleepless nights—he had pleaded with the criminal slouching before him, "If you have any hope of surviving this moment, do not lie to me. If you have some smallest vision of yet changing your life—even if you have lied with every breath from your first, tell the truth *now.*" But few there—tragically few—were able to break the habit of a lifetime; and Judge Kao Yu would once again see the dragon-like horned head go down, and would lower his own head and close his eyes, praying this time not to hear the soft-footed rush across the courtroom, and the terrible scream of despair that followed. But he always did.

China being as huge and remarkably varied a land as it is, the judge who could afford to spend all his time in one town and one court was in those days very nearly as rare as a unicorn himself. Like every jurist of his acquaintance, Kao Yu traveled the country round a good half of the year: his usual route, beginning every spring, taking him through every village of any size from Guangzhou to YinChuan. He traveled always with a retinue of three: his burly lieutenant, whose name was Wang Da, his secretary, Chou Qingshan, and Hu Longwei, who was both cook and porter—and, as such, treated with even more courtesy by Kao Yu than were his two other assistants. For he believed, judge or no, that the more lowly placed the person, the more respect he or she deserved. This made him much beloved in rather odd places, but not nearly as wealthy as he should have been.

The *chi-lin,* naturally, did not accompany him on his judicial rounds; rather, it appeared when it chose, most often when his puzzlement over a case was at its height, and his need of wisdom greatest. Nor did it ever stay

long in the courtroom, but simply delivered its silent judgment and was gone. Chou Qingshan commented—Kao Yu's other two assistants, having more than once seen that judgment executed, were too frightened of the unicorn ever to speak of it at all—that its presence did frequently shorten the time spent on a hearing, since many criminals tended to be even more frightened than they, and often blurted out the truth at first sight. On the other hand, the judge just as often went months without a visit from the *chi-lin,* and was forced to depend entirely on his own wit and his own sensibilities. Which, as he told his assistants, was a very good thing indeed.

"Because if it were my choice," he said to them, "I would leave as many decisions as I was permitted at the feet of this creature out of Heaven, this being so much wiser than I. I would then be no sort of judge, but a mindless, unreasoning acolyte, and I would not like that in the least." After a thoughtful moment, he added, "Nor would the *chi-lin* like it either, I believe."

Now it happened that in a certain town, where he had been asked on very short notice to come miles out of his way to substitute for a judge who had fallen ill, Kao Yu was asked to pass judgment on an imprisoned pickpocket. The matter was so far below his rank—it would have been more suited for a novice in training—that even such an unusually egalitarian person as Kao Yu bridled at the effrontery of the request. But the judge he was replacing, one Fang An, happened to be an esteemed former teacher of his, so there was really nothing for it but that he take the case. Kao Yu shrugged in his robes, bowed, assented, arranged to remain another night at the wagoners' inn—the only lodging the town could offer—and made the best of things.

The pickpocket, as it turned out, was a young woman of surpassing, almost shocking beauty: small and slender, with eyes and hair and skin to match that of any court lady Kao Yu had ever seen, all belying her undeniable peasant origins. She moved with a gracious air that set him marveling, "What is she doing before me, in this grubby little courtroom? She ought to be on a tapestry in some noble's palace, and I … I should be in that tapestry as well, kneeling before *her,* rather than this other way around." And no such thought had ever passed through the mind of Judge Kao Yu in his entirely honorable and blameless life.

To the criminal in the dock he said, with remarkable gentleness that did not go unnoticed by either his lieutenant or his secretary, "Well, what have you to say for yourself, young woman? What is your name, and how

have you managed to place yourself into such a disgraceful situation?" Wang Da thought he sounded much more like the girl's father than her judge.

With a shy bow—and a smile that set even the chill blood of the secretary Chou Qingshan racing—the pickpocket replied humbly, "Oh, most honorable lord, I am most often called Snow Ermine by the evil companions who lured me into this shameful life—but my true name is Lanying." She offered no family surname, and when Kao Yu requested it, she replied, "Lord, I have vowed never to speak that name again in this life, so low have I brought it by my contemptible actions." A single delicate tear spilled from the corner of her left eye, and left its track down the side of her equally delicate nose.

Kao Yu, known for leaving his own courtroom in favor of another judge if he suspected that he was being in some way charmed or cozened by a prisoner, was deeply touched by her manner and her obvious repentance. He cleared his suddenly hoarse throat and addressed her thus: "Lanying … ah, young woman … this being your first offense, I am of a mind to be lenient with you. I therefore sentence you, first, to return every single *liang* that you have been convicted of stealing from the following citizens—" and he nodded to Chou Qingshan to read off the list of the young pickpocket's victims. "In addition, you are hereby condemned"—he saw Lanying's graceful body stiffen—"to spend a full fortnight working with the night soil collectors of this community, so that those pretty hands may remember always that even the lowest, filthiest civic occupation is preferable to the dishonorable use in which they have hitherto been employed. Take her away."

To himself he sounded like a prating, pompous old man, but everyone else seemed suitably impressed. This included the girl Lanying, who bowed deeply in submission and turned to be led off by two sturdy officers of the court. She seemed so small and fragile between them that Kao Yu could not help ordering Chou Qingshan, in a louder voice than was strictly necessary, "Make that a week—a week, not a whole fortnight. Do you hear me?"

Chou Qingshan nodded and obeyed, his expression unchanged, his thoughts his own. But Lanying, walking between the two men, turned her head and responded to this commutation of her sentence with a smile that flew so straight to Judge Kao Yu's heart that he could only cough and look away, and be grateful to see her gone when he raised his eyes again.

To his assistants he said, “That is the last of my master Fang An’s cases, so let us dine and go to rest early, that we may be on our way at sunrise.” And both Wang Da and Chou Qingshan agreed heartily with him, for each had seen how stricken he had been by a thief’s beauty and charm; and each felt that the sooner he was away from this wretched little town, the better for all of them. Indeed, neither Kao Yu’s lieutenant nor his secretary slept well that night, for each had the same thought: “He is a man who has been much alone—he will dream of her tonight, and there will be nothing we can do about that.”

And in this they were entirely correct, for Kao Yu did indeed dream of Lanying the pickpocket, not only that night, but for many nights thereafter, to the point where, even to his cook, Hu Longwei, who was old enough to notice only what he was ordered to notice, he appeared like one whom a lamia or succubus is visiting in his sleep, being increasingly pale, gaunt and exhausted, as well a notably short-tempered and—for the first time in his career—impatient and erratic in his legal decisions. He snapped at Wang Da, rudely corrected Chou Qingshan’s records and transcriptions of his trials, rejected even his longtime favorites of Hu Longwei’s dishes, and regularly warned them all that they could easily be replaced by more accomplished and respectful servants, which was a term he had never employed in reference to any of them. Then, plainly distraught with chagrin, he would apologize to each man in turn, and try once again to evict that maddening young body and captivating smile from his nights. He was never successful at this.

During all this time, the *chi-lin* made not a single appearance in his various courtrooms, which even his retinue, as much as they feared it, found highly unusual, and probably a very bad omen. Having none but each other to discuss the matter with, often clustered together in one more inn, one more drovers’ hostel, quite frequently within earshot of Kao Yu tossing and mumbling in his bed, Chou Qingshan would say, “Our master has certainly lost the favor of Heaven, due to his obsession with that thieving slut. For the life of me, I cannot understand it—she was pretty enough, in a coarse way, but hardly one to cost *me* so much as an hour of sleep.”

To which Wang Da would invariably respond, “Well, nothing in this world would do *that* but searching under your bed for a lost coin.” They were old friends, and, like many such, not particularly fond of each other.

But Hu Longwei—in many ways the wisest of the three — when off

duty would quiet the other two by saying, “If you both spent a little more time considering our master’s troubles, and a little less on your own grievances, we might be of some actual use to him in this crisis. He is not the first man to spend less than an hour in some woman’s company and then be ridden sleepless by an unresolved fantasy, however absurd. Do not interrupt me, Wang. I am older than both of you, and I know a few things. The way to rid Kao Yu of these dreams of his is to return to that same town—I cannot even remember what it was called—and arrange for him to spend a single night with that little pickpocket. Believe me, there is nothing that clears away such a dream faster than its fulfillment. Think on it—and keep out of my cooking wine, Chou, or I may find another use for my cleaver.”

The lieutenant and the secretary took these words more to heart than Hu Longwei might have expected, the result being that somehow, on the return leg of their regular route, Wang Da developed a relative in poor health living in a village within easy walking distance of the town where Lanying the pickpocket resided—employed now, all hoped, in some more respectable profession. Kao Yu’s servants never mentioned her name when they went together to the judge to implore a single night’s detour on the long way home. Nor, when he agreed to this, did Kao Yu.

It cannot be said that his mental or emotional condition improved greatly with the knowledge that he was soon to see Snow Ermine again. He seemed to sleep no better, nor was he any less gruff with Wang, Chou, and Hu, even when they were at last bound on the homeward journey. The one significant difference in his behavior was that he regained his calm, unhurried courtroom demeanor, as firmly decisive as always, but paying the strictest attention to the merits of the cases he dealt with, whether in a town, a mere village, or even a scattering of huts and fields that could barely be called a hamlet. It was as though he was in some way preparing himself for the next time the beautiful pickpocket was brought before him, knowing that there *would* be a next time, as surely as sunrise. But what he was actually thinking on the road to that sunrise … that no one could have said, except perhaps the *chi-lin.* And there is no account anywhere of any *chi-lin* ever speaking in words to a human being.

The town fathers were greatly startled to see them again, since there had been no request for their return, and no messages to announce it. But they welcomed the judge and his entourage all the same, and put them up without charge at the wagoners’ inn for a second time. And that evening,

without notifying his master, Wang Da slipped away quietly and eventually located Lanying the pickpocket in the muddy alley where she lived with a number of the people who called her “Snow Ermine.” When he informed her that he came from Judge Kao Yu, who would be pleased to honor her with an invitation to dinner, Lanying favored him with the same magically rapturous smile, and vanished into the hovel to put on her most respectable robe, perfectly suitable for dining with a man who had sentenced her to collect and dispose of her neighbors’ night soil. Wang Da waited outside for her, giving earnest thanks for his own long marriage, his five children, and his truly imposing ugliness.

On their way to the inn, Lanying—for all that she skipped along beside him like a child on her way to a puppet show or a party—shrewdly asked Wang Da, not why Kao Yu had sent for her, but what he could tell her about the man himself. Wang Da, normally a taciturn man, except when taunting Chou Qingshan, replied cautiously, wary of her cleverness, saying as little as he could in courtesy. But he did let her know that there had never been a woman of any sort in Kao Yu’s life, not as long as he had worked for him—and he did disclose the truth of the judge’s *chi-lin*. It is perhaps the heart of this tale that Lanying chose to believe one of these truths, and to disdain the other.

Kao Yu had, naturally, been given the finest room at the inn, which was no great improvement over any other room, but did have facilities for the judge to entertain a guest in privacy. Lanying fell to her knees and kowtowed—knocked head—the moment she entered, Wang Da having simply left her at the door. But Kao Yu raised her to her feet and served her Dragon in the Clouds tea, and after that *huangjiu* wine, which is made from wheat. By the time these beverages had been consumed—time spent largely in silence and smiles—the dinner had been prepared and brought to them by Hu Longwei himself, who had pronounced the inn’s cook “a northern barbarian who should be permitted to serve none but monkeys and foreigners.” He set the trays down carefully on the low table, peered long and rudely into Lanying’s face, and departed.

“Your servants do not like me,” Lanying said with a small, unhappy sigh. “Why should they, after all?”

Kao Yu answered, bluntly but kindly, “They have no way of knowing whether you have changed your life. Nor did I make you promise to do so when I pronounced sentence.” Without further word he fed her a bit of their roast pork appetizer, and then asked quietly, “Have you done so? Or

are you still Lanying the Pickpocket?"

Lanying sighed again, and smiled wryly at him. "No, my lord, these days I am Lanying the Seamstress. I am not very good at it, in truth, but I work cheaply. Sometimes I am Lanying the Cowherd—Lanying the Pig Girl—Lanying the Sweeper at the market." She nibbled daintily at her dish, plainly trying to conceal her hunger. "But the pickpocket, no, nor the thief, nor…" and here she looked directly into Kao Yu's eyes, and he noticed with something of a shock that her own were not brown, as he had remembered them, but closer to a kind of dark hazel, with flecks of green coming and going. "Nor have I yet been Lanying the Girl on the market, though it has been a close run once or twice. But I have kept the word I did not give you"—she lowered her eyes then—"perhaps out of pride, perhaps out of gratitude … perhaps…" She let the words trail away unfinished, and they dined without speaking for some while, until Lanying was able to regard Kao Yu again without blushing.

Then it was Kao Yu's turn to feel his cheeks grow hot, as he said, "Lanying, you must understand that I have not been much in the society of women. At home I dine alone in my rooms, always; when I am traveling I am more or less constantly in the company of my assistants Wang, Chou, and Hu, whom I have known for many years. But since we met, however unfortunately, I have not been able to stop thinking of you, and imagining such an evening as we are enjoying. I am certain that this is wrong, unquestionably wrong for a judge, but when I look at you I cannot breathe, and I cannot feel my heart beating at all. I am too old for you, and you are too beautiful for me, and I think you should probably leave after we finish our meal. I do."

Lanying began to speak, but Kao Yu took her wrists in his hands, and she—who had some experience in these matters—felt his grip like manacles. He said, "Because, if you never make away with another purse in your life, Lanying the Pickpocket is still there in the back of those lovely eyes. I see her there even now, because although I am surely a great fool, I am also a judge."

He released his hold on her then, and they sat staring at one another—for how long Kao Yu could never say or remember. Lanying finally whispered, "Your man Wang told me that a unicorn, a *chi-lin,* sometimes helps you to arrive at your decisions. What do you think it would advise you if it were here now?"

Nor was Kao Yu ever sure how many minutes or hours went by before

he was finally able to say, “The *chi-lin* is not here.” And outside the door, Chou Qingshan held out his open palm and Wang Da and Hu Longwei each grudgingly slapped a coin into it as the three of them tiptoed away.

Lanying was gone when Kao Yu woke in the morning, which was, as it turned out, rather a fortunate thing. He was almost finished tidying up the remains of their meal—several items had been crushed and somewhat scattered, and one plate was actually broken—when Wang Da entered to tell him that his dinner guest had stopped long enough while departing the inn in the deep night to empty the landlord’s money box, leaving an impudent note of thanks before vanishing. And vanish she certainly had: the search that Kao Yu organized and led himself turned up no trace of her, neither in her usual haunts nor in areas where she claimed to have worked, or was known to have friends. Snow Ermine had disappeared as completely as though she had never been. Which, in a sense, she never had.

Kao Yu, being who he was, compensated the landlord in full—over the advice of all three of his assistants—and they continued on the road home. No one spoke for the first three days.

Finally, in a town in Hunan Province, where the four of them were having their evening meal together, Kao Yu broke his silence, saying, “Every one of you is at complete liberty to call me a stupid, ridiculous old fool. You will only be understating the case. I beg pardon of you all.” And he actually kowtowed—knocked head—in front of his own servants.

Naturally, Chou, Wang, and Hu were properly horrified at this, and upset their own dishes rushing to raise Kao Yu to his feet. They assured him over and over that the robbery at the inn could not in any way be blamed on him, even though he *had* invited the thief to dinner there, and she *had* spent the night in his bed, taking fullest advantage of his favor … the more they attempted to excuse him of the responsibility, the more guilty he felt, and the angrier at himself for, even now, dreaming every night of the embraces of that same thief. He let his three true friends comfort him, but all he could think of was that he would never again be able to return the gaze of the unicorn in his courtroom with the same pride and honesty. The *chi-lin* would know the truth, even of his dreams. The *chi-lin* always knew.

When they returned without further incident to the large southern city that was home to all four of them, Kao Yu allowed himself only two days to rest, and then flung himself back into his occupation with a savage

vengeance aimed at himself and no one else. He remained as patient as ever with his assistants—and, for the most part, with the accused brought to him for judgment. Indeed, as culpable as his dreams kept telling him he was, he sympathized more with these petty, illiterate, drink-sodden, hopeless, useless offscourings of decent society than he ever had in his career—in his life. Whether the useless offscourings themselves ever recognized this is not known.

Wang Da, Chou Qingshan, and Hu Longwei all hoped that time and work would gradually free his mind of Snow Ermine—which was the only way they spoke of her from then on—and at first, because they wanted it so much to be true, they believed that it must be. And while they were at home in the city, living the life of a busy city judge and his aides, dining with other officials, advising on various legal matters, speaking publicly to certain conferences, and generally filling their days with lawyers and the law, this did indeed seem to be so. Further, to their vast relief, Kao Yu's unicorn paid him no visits during that time; in fact, it had not been seen for more than a year. In private, he himself regarded this as a judgment in its own right, but he said nothing about that, considering it his own harsh concern. So all appeared to be going along in a proper and tranquil manner, as had been the case before the mischance that called him to an all-but-nameless town to deal with the insignificant matter of that wretched—and nameless—pickpocket.

Consequently, when it came the season for them to take to the long road once more, the judge's assistants each had every reason to hope that he would show himself completely recovered from his entanglement with that same wretched pickpocket. Particularly since this time they would have no reason to pass anywhere near that town where she plied her trade, and where Kao Yu might just conceivably be called upon again to pass sentence upon her. It was noted as they set out, not only that the weather was superb, but that their master was singing to himself: very quietly, true—almost wordlessly, almost in a whisper—but even so. The three looked at each other and dared to smile; and if smiles made any sound, that one would have been a whisper too.

At first the journey went well, barring the condition of the spring roads, which were muddy, as always, and sucked tiresomely at the feet of their horses. But there were fewer criminal cases than usual for Kao Yu to deal with, and most of those were run-of-the-mill affairs: a donkey or a few chickens stolen *here,* a dispute over fishing rights or a right of way *there,* a

wife assaulting her husband—for excellent reasons—over *there*. Such dull daily issues might be uninteresting to any but the participants, but they had the distinct advantage of taking up comparatively little time; as a rule Kao Yu and his retinue never needed to spend more than a day and a night in any given town. On the rare occasions when they stayed longer, it was always to rest the horses, never themselves. But that suited all four of them, especially Wang Da, who, for all his familial responsibilities, remained as passionately devoted to his wife as any new bridegroom, and was beginning to allow himself sweet visions of returning home earlier than expected. The others teased him rudely that he might well surprise the greengrocer or the fishmonger in his bed, but Kao Yu reproved them sharply, saying, “True happiness is as delicate as a dragonfly’s wing, and it is not to be made sport of.” And he patted Wang Da’s shoulder, as he had never done before, and rode on, still singing to himself, a very little.

But once they reached the province where the girl called Snow Ermine lived—even though, as has been said, their route had been planned to take them as far as possible from her home—then the singing stopped, and Kao Yu grew day by day more silent and morose. He drew apart from his companions, both in traveling and in their various lodgings; and while he continued to take his cases, even the most trifling, as seriously as ever, his entire courtroom manner had become as dry and sour as that of a much older judge. This impressed very favorably most of the local officials he dealt with, but his assistants knew what unhappiness it covered, and pitied him greatly.

Chou Qingshan predicted that he would return to his old self once they were clear of the province that had brought him to such shame and confusion; and to some degree that was true as they rode on from town to village, village to town. But the soft singing never did come again, which in time caused the cook, Hu Longwei, to say, “He is like a vase or a pot that has been shattered into small bits, and then restored, glued back together, fragment by fragment. It will look as good as new, if the work is done right, but you have to be careful with it. *We* will have to be careful.”

Nevertheless, their progress was so remarkable that they were almost two weeks ahead of schedule when they reached YinChuan, where they were accustomed to rest and resupply themselves for a few days before starting home. But within a day of their arrival Kao Yu had been approached by both the mayor of the town and the provincial governor as well, both asking him if he would be kind enough to preside over a

particular case for them tomorrow. A YinChuan judge had already been chosen, of course, and would doubtless do an excellent job; but like every judge available, he had no experience handling such a matter as murder, and it was well-known that Kao Yu—

Kao Yu said, “Murder? This is truly a murder case you are asking me to deal with?”

The mayor nodded miserably. “We know that you have come a long journey, and have a long journey yet before you … but the victim was an important man, a merchant all the way from Harbin, and his family is applying a great deal of pressure on the entire city administration, not me alone. A judge of your stature agreeing to take over … it might calm them somewhat, reassure them that something is being done…”

“Tell me about the case,” Kao Yu interrupted brusquely. Hu Longwei groaned quietly, but Chou and Wang were immediately excited, though they properly made every effort not to seem so. An illegally-established tollgate, a neighbor poaching rabbits on a neighbor’s land, what was that compared to a real murder? With Kao Yu they learned that the merchant—young, handsome, vigorous, and with, as even his family admitted, far more money than sense—had wandered into the wrong part of town and struck up several unwise friendships, most particularly one with a young woman—

“A pickpocket?” Kao Yu’s voice had suddenly grown tight and rasping.

No, apparently not a pickpocket. Apparently her talents lay elsewhere —

“Was she called … Snow Ermine?”

“That name has not been mentioned. When she was taken into custody, she gave the name ‘Spring Lamb.’ Undoubtedly an alias, or a nickname—”

“Undoubtedly. Describe her.” But then Kao Yu seemed to change his mind, saying, “No … no, do not describe her to me. Have all the evidence in the matter promptly delivered to our inn, and let me decide then whether or not I will agree to sit on the case. You will have my answer tonight, if the evidence reaches the inn before we do.”

It did, as Kao Yu’s assistants knew it would; but all three of them agreed that they had never seen their master so reluctant even to handle the evidence pertaining to a legal matter. There was plenty of it, certainly, from the sworn statements of half a dozen citizens swearing to having seen the victim in the company of the accused; to the proprietor of a particularly disreputable wine shop, who had sold the pair enough liquor,

jar on jar, to float a river barge; let alone the silent witness of the young merchant's slit-open purse, and of the slim silver knife still buried to the hilt in his side when he was discovered in a trash-strewn alley with dogs sniffing at his body. There was even—when his rigor-stiffened left hand was pried open—a crushed rag of a white flower. Judge Kao Yu's lamp burned all night in his room at the inn.

But in the morning, when Wang Da came to fetch him, he was awake and clear-eyed, and had already breakfasted, though only on green tea and sweetened *congee*. He was silent as they walked to the building set aside for trials of all sorts, where Hu Longwei and Chou Qingshan awaited them; except to remark that they would be starting home on the day after tomorrow, distinctly earlier than their usual practice. He said nothing further until they reached the courtroom.

There were two minor cases to be disposed of before the matter of the young merchant's murder: one a suit over a breach of contract, the other having to do with a long-unpaid family debt. Kao Yu settled these swiftly, and then—a little pale, his words a bit slower, but his voice quiet and steady—signaled for the accused murderer to be brought into court.

It was Lanying, as he had known in his heart that it would be, from the very first mention of the case. Alone in his room, he had not even bothered to hope that the evidence would prove her innocent, or, at very least, raise some small doubt as to her guilt. He had gone through it all quickly enough, and spent the rest of the night sitting very still, with his hands clasped in his lap, looking toward the door, as though expecting her to come to him then and there, of her own will, instead of waiting until morning for her trial. From time to time, in the silence of the room, he spoke her name.

Now, as the two constables who had led her to his high bench stepped away, he looked into her calmly defiant eyes and said only, "We meet again."

"So we do," Lanying replied equably. She was dressed rakishly, having been seized before she had time to change into garments suitable for a court appearance; but as ever she carried herself with the pride and poise of a great lady. She said to Kao Yu, "I hoped you might be the one."

"Why is that? Because I let you off lightly the first time? Because I … because it was so easy for you to make a fool of me the next time?" Kao Yu was almost whispering. "Do you imagine that I will be quite as much of a mark today?"

"No. But I did wish to apologize."

"Apologize?" Kao Yu stared at her. "*Apologize?*"

Lanying bowed her head, but she looked up at him from under her long dark eyelashes. "Lord, I am a thief. I have been a thief all my life. A thief steals. I knew the prestige of your invitation to dine would give me a chance at the inn's money box, and I accepted it accordingly, because that is what a thief does. It had nothing to do with you, with my … liking for you. I am what I am."

Kao Yu's voice was thick in his throat. "You are what you have become, which is something more than a mere thief and pickpocket. Now you are a murderer."

The word had not been at all hard to get out when he was discussing it with the mayor, and with his three assistants, but now it felt like a thornbush in his throat. Lanying's eyes grew wide with fear and protest. "*I?* Never! I had *nothing* to do with that poor man's death!"

"The knife is yours," Kao Yu said tonelessly. "It is the same one I noticed at your waist when you dined with me. Nor have I ever seen you without a white flower in your hair. Do not bother lying to me any further, Lanying."

"But I am not lying!" she cried out. "I took his money, yes—he was stupid with wine, and that is what I do, but killing is no part of it. The knife was stolen from me, I swear it! Think as little of me as you like—I have given you reason enough—but I am no killer, you *must* know that!" She lowered her voice, to keep the words that followed from the constables. "Our bodies tell the truth, if our mouths do not. My lord, my judge, you know as much truth of me as anyone does. Can you tell me again that I am a murderer?"

Kao Yu did not answer her. They looked at each other for a long time, the judge and the lifelong thief, and it seemed to Chou Qingshan that there had come a vast weariness on Kao Yu, and that he might never speak again to anyone. But then Kao Yu lifted his head in wonder and fear as the scent of a summer meadow drifted into the room, filling it with the warm, slow presence of wild ginger, hibiscus, lilacs, and lilies—and the *chi-lin.* The two constables fell to their knees and pressed their faces to the floor, as did his three assistants, none of them daring even to look up. The unicorn stood motionless at the back of the courtroom, and Kao Yu could no more read its eyes than he ever could. But in that moment he knew Lanying's terrible danger for his own.

Very quietly he said to her, “Snow Ermine, Spring Lamb, thief of my foolish, foolish old heart … nameless queen born a criminal … and, yes, murderer—I am begging you now for both our lives. Speak the truth, if you never do so again, because otherwise you die here, and so do I. Do you hear me, Lanying?”

Just for an instant, looking into Lanying’s beautiful eyes, he knew that she understood exactly what he was telling her, and, further, that neither he nor the *chi-lin* was in any doubt that she had slain the merchant she robbed. But she was, as she had told him, what she was; and even with full knowledge of the justice waiting, she repeated, spacing the words carefully, and giving precise value to each, “Believe what you will. I am no killer.”

Then the judge Kao Yu rose from his bench and placed himself between Lanying and the unicorn, and he said in a clear, strong voice, “You are not to harm her. Everything she says is a lie, and always will be, and still you are not to harm her.” In the silence that followed, his voice shook a little as he added, “Please.”

The *chi-lin* took a step forward—then another—and Lanying closed her eyes. But it did not charge; rather, it paced across the courtroom to face Kao Yu, until they were standing closer than ever they had before, in all the years of their strange and wordless partnership. And what passed between them then will never be known, save to say that the *chi-lin* turned away and was swiftly gone—never having once glanced at Lanying—and that Kao Yu sat down again and began to weep, without ever making a sound.

When he could speak, he directed the trembling constables to take Lanying away, saying that he would pass sentence the next day. She went, this time, without a backward glance, as proudly as ever, and Kao Yu did not look after her but walked away alone. Wang Da and Chou Qingshan would have followed him, but Hu Longwei took them both by the arms and shook his head.

Kao Yu spent the night alone in his room, where he could be heard pacing constantly, sometimes talking to himself in ragged, incomprehensible tatters of language. Whatever it signified, it eliminated him as a suspect in Lanying’s escape from custody that same evening. She was never recaptured, reported, or heard of again—at least, not under that name, nor in that region of China—and if each of Kao Yu’s three friends regarded the other two skeptically for a long time thereafter, no one

accused anyone of anything, even in private. Indeed, none of them ever spoke of Lanying, the pickpocket, thief, and murderer for whom their master had given up what they knew he had given up. They had no words for it, but they knew.

For the *chi-lin* never came again, and Kao Yu never spoke of that separation either. The one exception came on their silent road home, when darkness caught them between towns, obliging them to make camp in a forest, as they were not unaccustomed to doing. They gathered wood together, and Hu Longwei improvised an excellent dinner over their fire, after which they chatted and bantered as well as they could to cheer their master, so silent now for so many days. It was then that Kao Yu announced his decision to retire from the bench, which shocked and dismayed them all, and set each man entreating him to change his mind. In this they were unsuccessful, though they argued and pleaded with him most of the night. It was nearer to dawn than to midnight, and the flames were dwindling because everyone had forgotten to feed them, when Chou Qingshan remarked bitterly, “So much for justice, then. With you gone, so much for justice between Guangzhou and YinChuan.”

But Kao Yu shook his head and responded, “You misunderstand, old friend. I am only a judge, and judges can always be found. The *chi-lin*…the *chi-lin* is justice. There is a great difference.”

He did indeed retire, as he had said, and little is known of the rest of his life, except that he traveled no more, but stayed in his house, writing learned commentaries on curious aspects of common law and, on rare occasions, lecturing to small audiences at the local university. His three assistants, of necessity, attached themselves to other circuit-riding judges, and saw less of one another than they did of Kao Yu, whom they never failed to visit on returning from their journeys. But there was less and less to say each time, and each admitted—though only to himself—a kind of guilt-stricken relief when he died quietly at home, from what his doctors termed a sorrow of the soul. China is one of the few countries where sadness has always been medically recognized.

There is a legend that after the handful of mourners at his funeral had gone home, a *chi-lin* kept silent watch at his grave all that night. But that is all it is, of course, a legend.

About the Author

Peter S. Beagle is the best-selling author of The Last Unicorn, which has sold a reported five million copies since its initial publication in 1968. His other novels include A Fine & Private Place, The Innkeeper's Song, and Tamsin. His short fiction has been collected in four volumes by Tachyon Publications, including The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche, The Line Between, We Never Talk About My Brother, and Sleight of Hand. He has won the Hugo, Nebula, Mythopoeic, and Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire awards and the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement. You can sign up for email update here.

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